

俺と悪魔のブルーズ



平本アキラ

講談社

平本アキラ

× 地獄の狼犬に害れ ×
— Hell Hound to Die —

4
入魂しノミヤ

俺と悪魔のブルーズ

70年近くもの昔、わすか2曲のブルーズを録音しただけで、世を去った男がいた。

その後、数十年を経て、奴の名は伝説となり、残された楽曲は、あらゆる大衆音楽の源流となる。
その男を知る者は皆、奴のことを、こう噂した……

悪魔の魂を売った男



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講談社

27

風の若きで尊敬され、残した曲が数曲の録音で、現代の音楽シーンにまで比類なき影響を醸んだ実在のブルーズマン、ロバート・ジョンソン。十字路で悪魔と取り引きし、一夜にして天才となったという、この道に満ちた人物の「クロスロード伝説」をモチーフに、奇想の物語が“幻出”する! 1930年代初期・アメリカ中部、鉄道を絶好の熱地とする、とある田舎町の住下がり。脱獄囚の白人ギャング・クライドは、黒人ブルーズマン・R.J.の留置された保安官事務所へと乗りこんだ。しかし、リンチを逃れんとする2人に差し向けられたのは、恐るべき追跡者“地獄の狼犬”だった!! 圧倒的テンションで描くブルーズ・ノヴァール、仕境べし 解説 仲井戸麗市

登場人物

R.J. (テール・ビー) …… 本編の主人公、脱獄のブルーズ奏者
クライド …… 脱獄中の犯罪者
サンダーズ …… 保安官代理
ライナス …… 保安官
元保安官の友人
元保安官助手見習い
マクドナルド …… 禁錮の町への有力者

ウーレン …… マクドナルドの付き人
ギルビー …… マクドナルドの付き人
ジョーンス …… マクドナルドの執事
ガレル・ワッセル …… マクドナルドの僕人
グーリー …… マクドナルドの友人
サイクス …… マクドナルドの友人
ロイ・ソートン …… 自伝新聞記者、クライドの偽名



666

定価：本体

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AFREKIDGROSS INC.

俺と悪魔のブルース

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Hell Hound On My Trail



アフリキッド
VIC-467

俺と悪魔のブルース

④

地獄の狼犬に害れ

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悪魔のブルース













Me and the Devil Blues

4

Hell Hound on My Trail

Akira Hiramoto

Me & the Devil Blues

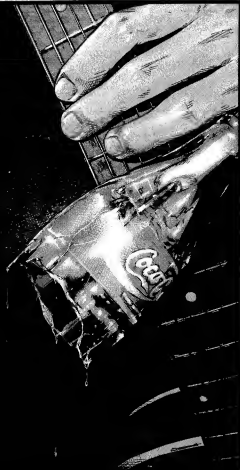
Volume **4** Hell Hound on My Tail
Akira Hiramoto

C o n t e n t s

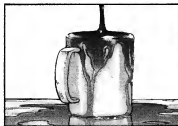
21/ If I Had Possession over Judgment Day, Part ⑦	283
22/ Hell Hound on G'Dy Trail, Part ①	323
23/ Hell Hound on G'Dy Trail, Part ②	345
24/ Hell Hound on G'Dy Trail, Part ③	371
25/ Hell Hound on G'Dy Trail, Part ④	403
26/ Hell Hound on G'Dy Trail, Part ⑤	437
27/ Hell Hound on G'Dy Trail, Part ⑥	469
28/ Hell Hound on G'Dy Trail, Part ⑦	519

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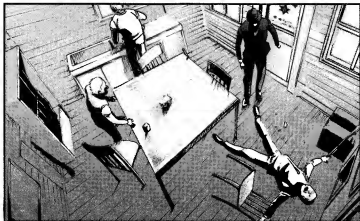


21/ If I Had Possession
over Judgment Day, Part 7









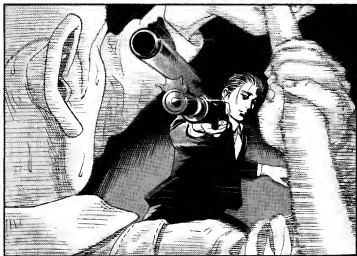














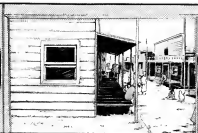








Shit...once I saw their faces, there was no way I could hold back. What can I say...I was born hot blooded...



Hell...I'm in deep shit now. If I hadn't been able to take down all those guys I'da been dead meat...

Shit! Only one thing I can do...find RJ!



So much for all the free vittles. The hell'm I gonna do now?



Damn it...no way I can go back to McDonald's place now.





He's at
death's
door-
step.

Told
Cruel
bastards ...



I came
to save
you.

Hey,
RJ,
wake
up.



Get
up!



Or would you rather sit here, and wait till they hang ya?



Please!

If you carry the negro to my car, I'll sneak you outta here with us...not a bad deal, huh? Even a dimwit can see that.



D-D-
Dim-
wit?

Hey, dimwit... throw that negro over your shoulder, and bring him over here.

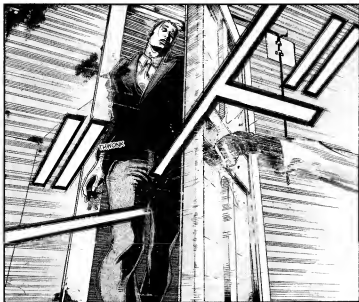


Help me!
I'll do anything!
Just take that key and open the cell!

Get me out of here, too!
Hey, buddy!
I'm begging you!

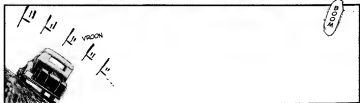


XXXXXXXXXX











Warren
...did
you...



That
was
close.



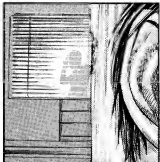
Hey!
Hurry
it up,
dimwit!
The whole
town's
gonna be
after us!





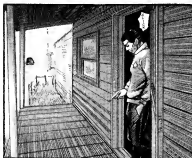




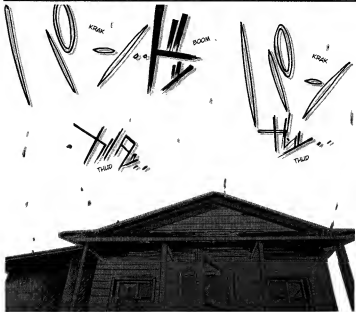










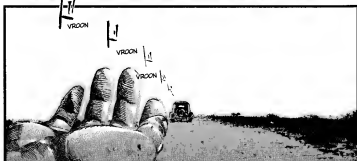


Wah ha ha ha ha ha ha



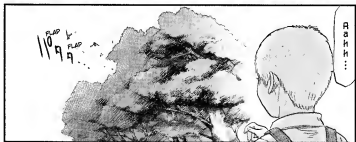
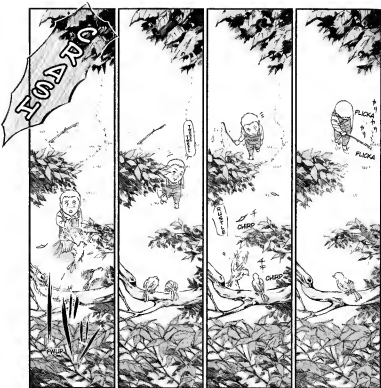


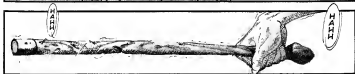


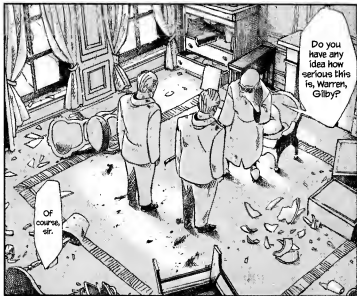






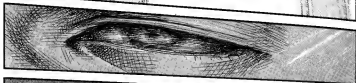




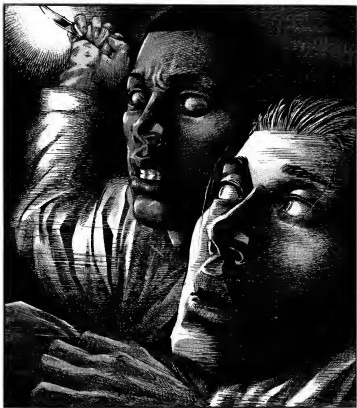




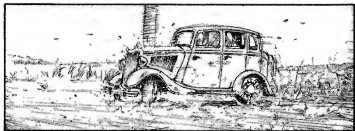
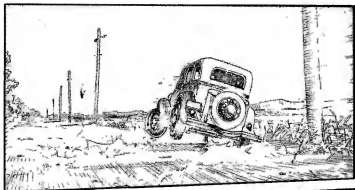


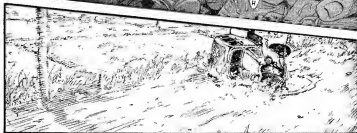










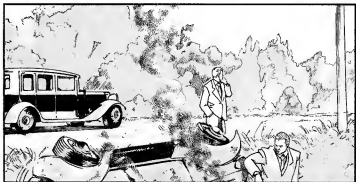














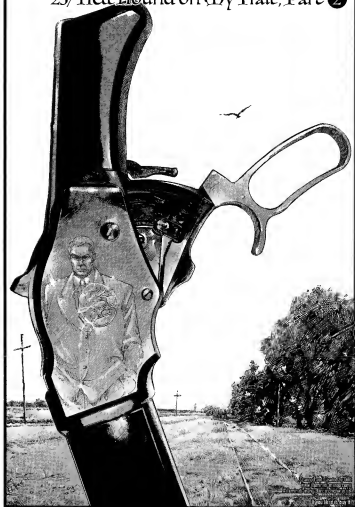
Round
up every
able-
bodied
man in
town!

Time
to go
huntin'.



Mend the Devil Blues

23/ Hell Hound on My Trail, Part 2











What
the hell?
Those
guys..?



Looks
like they're
having
a little
disagree-
ment.
That makes
things easy
for us.



Those
two
couldn't
make it
far.



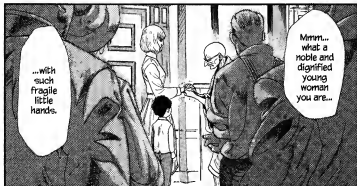
I don't got
no time to
hold your
hand, and
drive into
town with
you..

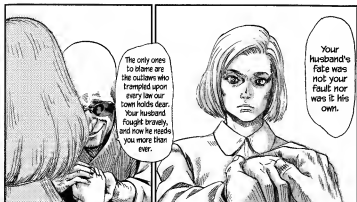












The only ones
to blame are
the outlaws who
trampled upon
every law our
town holds dear.
Your husband
fought bravely,
and now he needs
you more than
ever.

Your
husband's
fate was
not your
fault nor
was it his
own.



You have
nothing to
apologize
for.







Jones!

Yes, sir!

When you're hunting prey in the mountains, the wider the net, the easier the hunt. We just need as many eyes out there as we can get...that's all.

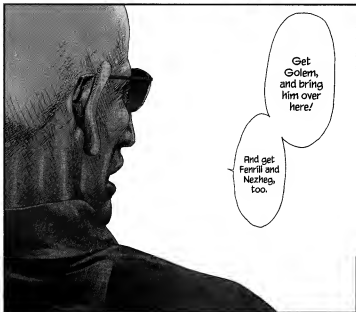


There's no need to worry.

All you need to do is grab a weapon, and help us contain these outlaws.



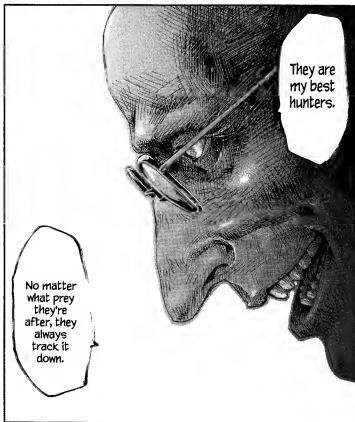
I'm not asking you to put yourselves in danger...

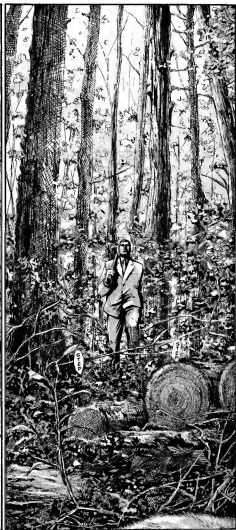


Get Golem, and bring him over here!

And get Ferrill and Nezheg, too.











Why
didn't
you kill
him?







You
want
'em to
catch
you?

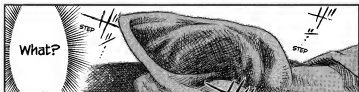
This
ain't nap
time,
RJ!

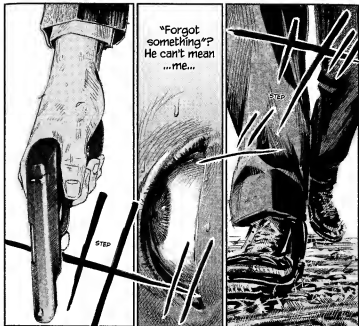


Shut
up...
just
leave
me...
leave
me
be...

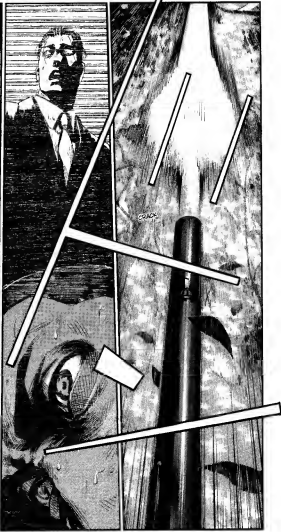
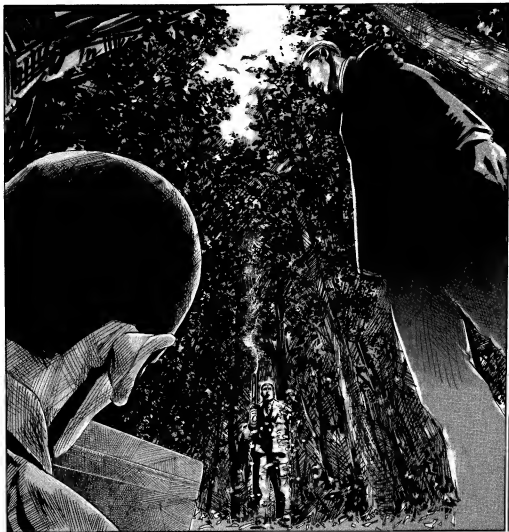


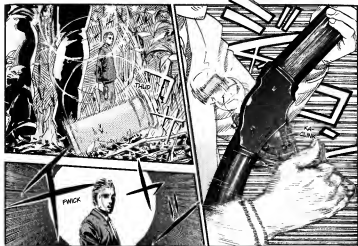
Suit
yourself.









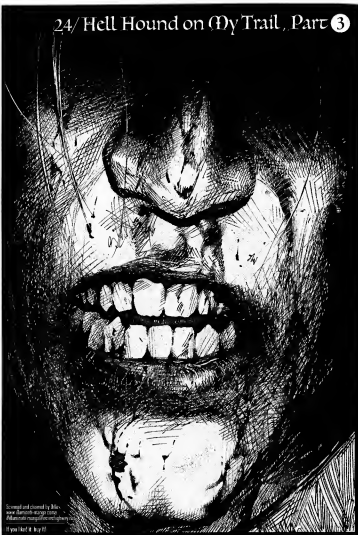


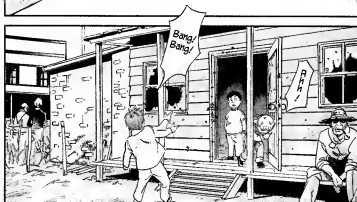
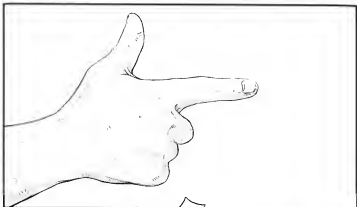
...Mr.
News-
paper
man!

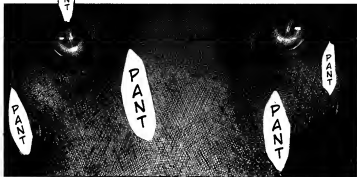
I've been
looking
for you...

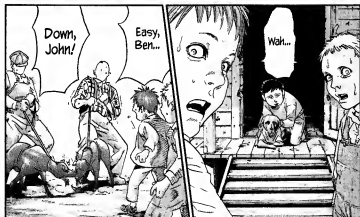
24/ Hell Hound on My Trail, Part 3

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www.filmbook-images.com
Illustrated by [mikejohnson.com](http://www.mikejohnson.com)
If you liked it, buy it!













Pathetic...
that's
what it
is.

And when he
finally wakes
up to these
other dogs
barking, all
he does is
whimper and
hide...



Tch...

Stupid
dog...

While his
master's
out fighting
gangsters,
he's
sprawled
out on
the porch
asleep.



Yeah,
let's go.

Why don't
y'all quit
your
laughing,
and get a
move on.









You think
you can just
break into the
sheriff's office
any old time
you want, you
no good piece
of
trash!

That nigger
killed a white
man! But you
value his life
so much that
you'll attack
another man
just to save
him?



So...
it was
revenge?



Then
why?

I didn't do
it for the
negro.



Huh?



Yeah...
The
negro
was just
an after-
thought.



Those
fuckin'
farmers
busted
my head
open with a
shovel.

They came
after me,
so I came
after them.
S'all there
is to it.



Tch.



That's the guitar that was in your car, isn't it?

So you did have it.



Tch... keeping your mouth shut, eh? Fine, time for me to get some payback.



If you do, you'd better talk.

How the hell did you hide it that day? You got some other partner we ain't found yet?







For you it's dogs... for others it's Mr. Golem.

Ha, ha... well, every man has his weakness.

Shit! I'm no good around dogs.



Golem?



Hey!

S-Sorry, Mr. Gilby!

You idiot! Control your dog!



Mr. McDonald's servants turned blue the moment they heard his name.

They were mighty scared.

Yeah... Looks like Mr. McDonald tagged Mr. Golem and his boys for the manhunt...



You asking me if Golem is meaner than me and Warren?



Heh...that's exactly what I'd expect from them.



I can't imagine anyone fiercer than you and Warren.

But...is this Mr. Golem fella...really that bad?

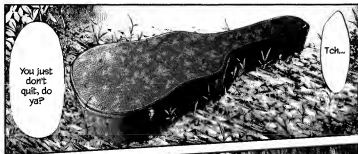


Why
don't
you ask
them?



Sounds
like they're
here.





You just
don't
quit, do
ya?

Tch...



I don't
know
what
the hell
you're
talking
about.

Huh?



This time
McDonald's
gonna bust
your nose
for real.

Or maybe
you like
it when he
roughs
you up.

Pervert.

Guitar
this...
guitar
that...
you go
on and
on...



There's
a guitar
sittin' in
front of
you plain as
day...

...and
you're
gonna tell
me there
ain't...

It's
sittin'
right
there! I
know you
see that
guitar.

That's
enough
out of
you, ya
piece of
shit!



Huh?
See
what?

You
see it.



Nope.



Ain't
nothin'
there!

Quit
fuckin'
with me!
It's sittin'
right
there!



Ugh...



BLRRF...
GRRGL

Now
maybe
you see
it!



You hit me
so much I
can't see
a damn
thing...



How d'ya
like that?
Come
to your
senses
yet, boy?

You see
that
guitar?

I'm
gonna
ask
you one
more
time...

I don't
...see
noth-
in'...



Hey,
nigger!

















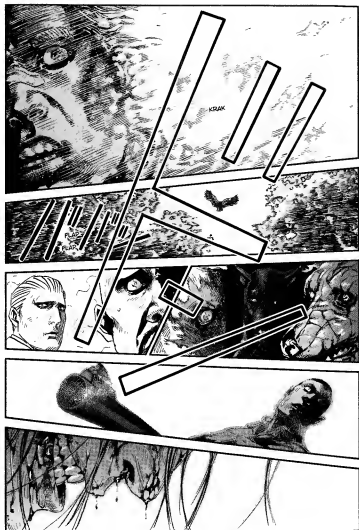






Mr.
McDonald's
loyal servants
...the most
ferocious
and cunning
hunters that
ever lived.



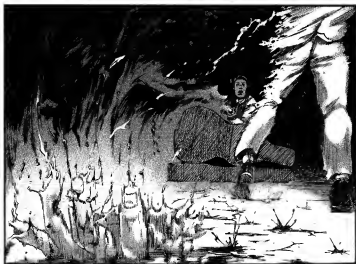


25/ Hell Hound on My Trail, Part 4



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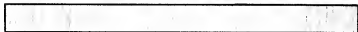


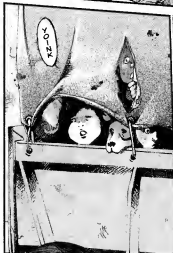


















Who cares
"why"?
A gun is
better
than a
guitar any
day. You
oughtta
be thankin'
me.



...in my
guitar
case?

What the
hell? Why's
there a
gun...



Where's
my guitar,
huh?
Where'd
you put
it?

Thankin'
you? The
hell I will!



Who
gives
a shit
about
your
damn
guitar!

Shit, what
the hell are
you fussing
about? You're
one crazy son
of a bitch.



It was
just a cheap
piece-of-
shit guitar.
I'll buy you
a new one,
so quit your
whining.

Leave
it behind?
My guitar?

Huh?
Uh... had
to leave it
behind.



What
do you
mean
"that's
not
all"?



You think a
guitar's gonna
help us get
outta town
alive? No! But
guns will. And
that case
was perfect
for carrying
guns.

And
that's
not
all.



...
and
...

You put
a gun
in my
goddam
guitar
case...



...made
me kill a
man!



Tch...

You're
po-
thetic...





Carry
it your-
self.

I ain't
tuggin'
your
shit
round
no
more.

You were just
gonna run
away weren't
you? With
your guitar
case full of
guns.



You were
all set to
leave me
behind.



Better
pick it up!



Looks
like you
"forgot
some-
thing"...









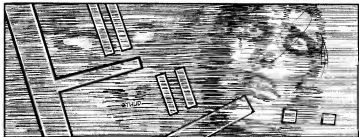










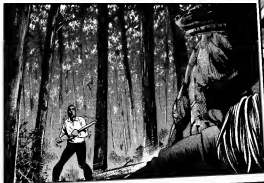




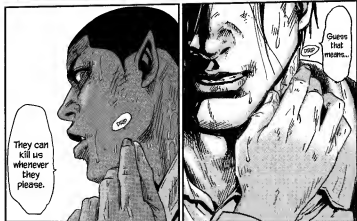












They can
kill us
whenever
they
please.



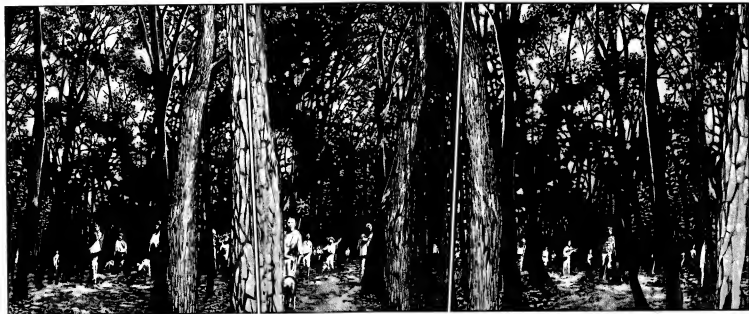
Guess
that
means...

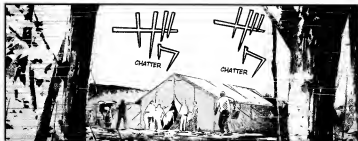


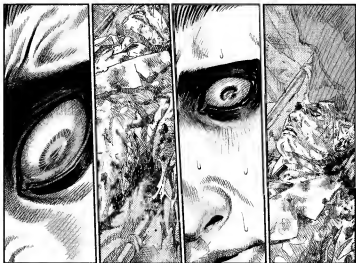
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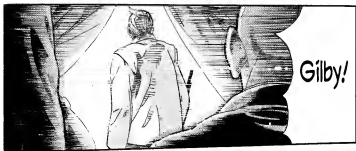
If you find it, buy it!

26/ Hell Hound on My Trail, Part 5









Gilby!



Where're
you
going?



I'm gonna
kill those
bastards
myself!

Where?
You
know
where!











Hey, R.J., you really think you can take on that monster with your little stick?



I'll give you a weapon. Just go over and grab the case for me.

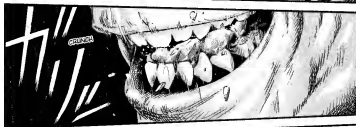
GRAB
#エス...

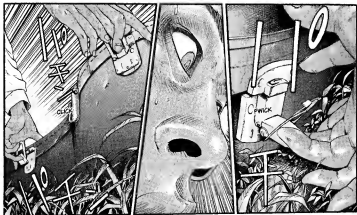


















Hyaaa!



Golem.



He's pure muscle and power...no man could stand a chance against him.





If he tears
his prey to
pieces...



Yes...but
Golem's
one
weakness
is that he
can't always
control all
that power.



We'll have
nothing
left for the
lynching.



There's
no need
to worry,
Gilby.

You're
right...
Golem's
sheer, raw
power is his
only asset...He
may not be
particularly well
suited for
hunting,
but...

He's a
monster
...



We're
doomed..



...not
alone!

And... looks
like he's...



...and those two
will keep Golem
under control.

They treat
Golem like their
little puppy.
They're clearly
superior when
it comes to
hunting...

We've
also got
Fenrill and
Nezhg
...

He...

Golem's
method of
hunting
is very
primitive.

...and he
destroys
it.

...finds
his prey...



Rather than seeking to destroy, Ferrill takes pleasure in the hunt...

He dives into the chase... and savors it like a sweet candy. Ferrill takes his time and enjoys the hunt... very much like you and I might.



But Ferrill is a different kind of hunter. While Golem relies on muscle, Ferrill uses intellect.



PANT

UHH

PANT

PANT

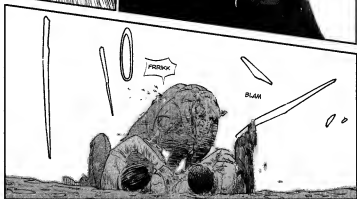
UHH



...holds command over both Ferrill and Golem...

And Nezheg...





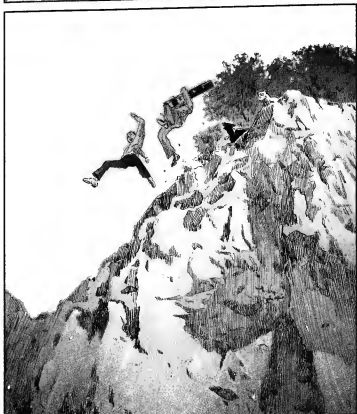








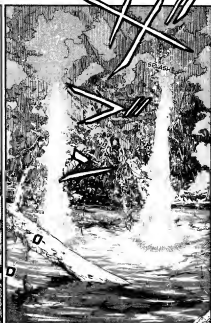


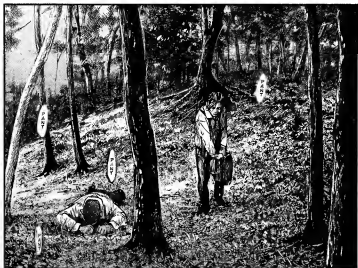
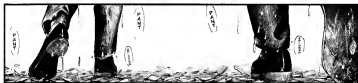














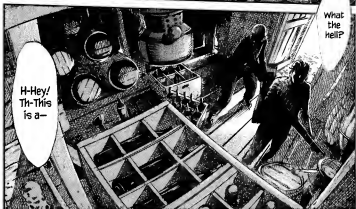














Huh?
That
you, Mr.
Jones?



So...what's
going on?
It must be
urgent.

CREAK

How's Mr.
McDonald
these
days?



We still
got two
weeks
before our
delivery
date.



Huh?













That old
man sure is
somethin'!

Ha, ha, ha...
"Carrion
Valley," huh?

He uses a
two-bit trick like
that to scare the
townsfolk away?



You tell a
soul about
this...and
you boys
are dead...

Ha/
Same
goes for
you...



What do you
say, R.J? What
do you think
of McDonald's
booze? "McDon-
ald Brand Moon-
shine." The only
booze that comes
stamped with a
prohibitionist's
seal of approval,
ha, ha, ha!



What a
waste!
All this
strong
booze and a
town that can't
drink it!



This one's
for drinkin',
and this
one's for
disinfectin'
...okay?



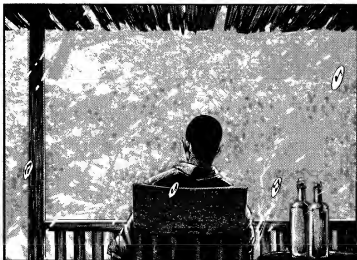
I know you
haven't
seen booze
in a while,
but don't
just drink
it...use
some
to clean
out your
wounds.

Hey,
R.J...

W W W



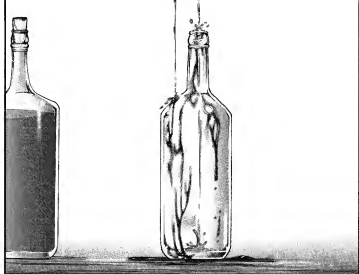




The mountains out here are steep, and treacherous. You'll either get lost, and die of exposure, or fall off a cliff...or even worse, the coyotes and wild dogs'll make a meal out of you.

Don't even think about trying to cross over those mountains. You'll never make it.

















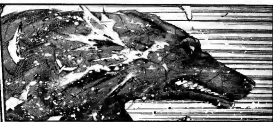
























We best
be on
our way.

Sun's
settin'.



Heh.
heh.

Heh...
heh...



...the
more I
see what
a true
bluesman
you really
are...

?



R.J...
The
more I
get to
know
ya...



S.W.P.

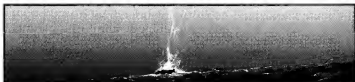


...that
mon-
ster...



Killin'...







"Dry
town"
my ass!

Son
of a
bitch..



He prolly
just saw it
as a way to
make some
dough.

Yeah,
but...that
old boot-
legger said
McDonald
hated
booze.

So he made
it illegal for
everyone
in town to
drink, while
he was hittin'
the booze all
the while.



But that
don't stop him
from being a
cunning ol' fuck. He
named this place
"Carrior Valley,"
so the townsfolk
would stay away.

Hell, guess
he couldn't
drink
even if he
wanted
to...he's
got the
diabetes.

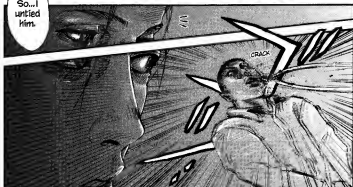
Tch/
Carrior
Valley?
Looks pretty
harmless to
me.



The men won't
come to pick
up their next
shipment of
booze for
another two
weeks, and...I
couldn't just
leave him for
dead.

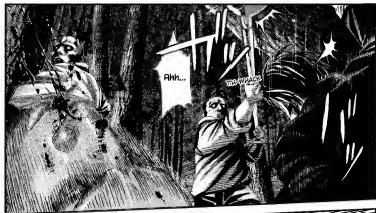
Hey,
what'd you
do with that
bootlegger?

Well...



So...I
untied
him.

CRACK







...I could
carry you
on my
back all
the way.



I ain't
such a
tough
guy
that...



Quit
talkin'
crazy!

...are you
sure...
It's really
there...

But...
is it...



it better
be
there...



Ah... RJ!
I see it!



We're
saved/
Look!
It's
right in
front of
us!



Hey!
Get
up!

RJ!

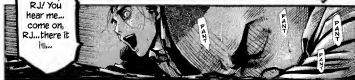


H-
Hey!



Just a few
more steps,
R.J! You
hear me...
come on,
R.J...there it
is...

Look!
There it is!
See those
lights...a
negro like
you oughtta
be able to
spot them a
mile away!



Just a few
more steps,
R.J! You
hear me...
come on,
R.J...there it
is...



...the
juke
joint!

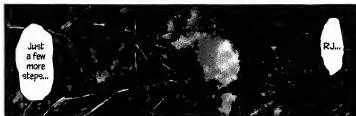
28/ Hell Hound on My Trail, Part 7



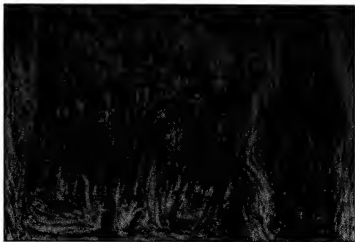
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Every second we sit here, we're putting our lives at risk.





...even
more
than
two.



No way
a white
man
like
me...

...can go
into a joint
like that
without a
negro to
guide him.





I'd be
dead...



That'd be
like puttin' a
single drop of
cream in a big
mug of black
coffee.



...in no
time.







I never
said I
wouldn't
pay up!

Give me
another
chance!



There's
only two
things
I hate...
white
folk...and
liars!

No
more
chances.







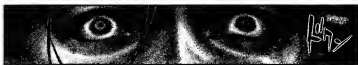


You with any other white folk?



No...
Just me.

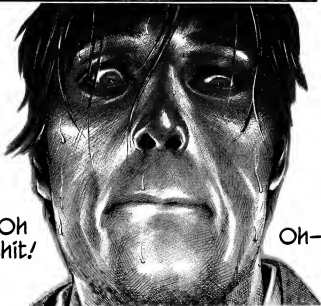






Oh
shit!

Oh—









...was
raped.

My
friend's
only
daughter
:



...just
like you.

Her
attack-
ers...
they
were
whites
:

His
daughter...
she
managed to
escape with
her life...but
she won't
never walk
again.

A child...
barely
twelve years
old...four
grown men
attacked
her.



See,
you white
folks...y'all
get special
treatment.




But there
wasn't
nothin'
we black
folk could
do about
it...even if
she was one
of us.



They
were
guilty...
plain as
could be.



And you
say your
"friend"
is one of
us?



Tch...and
who'd
expect any
different?
The judge,
the jury, all
white folks.
That ain't no
trial...ain't
nothin' but
a joke.



Didn't
take no
time for
them to find
them four
attackers
not guilty.
They wasn't
punished or
nuthin'.



They sure
do know how
to look out
for each
other...tch...
makes me
wan'na puke.

Even scum
of the earth
rapists like
them get
protection
from the
other white
folk...



Shit...

If he's friend to
a white man, he sure as
hell ain't one of us. You
see...just cause his skin
look like ours...that don't
make him one of us...we
negros just don't have
the luxury of thinkin'
like that! No, sir
we don't.



It was a
white devil like
you that took
my eye.

I'll tell
you one
more
thing...









Clyde?

Well...
you
right
about
that.



He's just
humble. No
real genius
would ever
call himself
a genius.

What're
you
talking
about,
Sykes?



H
u
h
?

I hear Lennie
Johnson
fainted when he
heard you play
guitar.



I know this
small town
juke joint ain't
deservin' of your
talent, but won't
you play for us?
We'd sure like to
hear the greatest
bluesman in the
country.

I couldn't
hardly believe
that ol'
Charley and
Son took
lessons from
a young'un
like you.



It's
okay.
Just
listen
...

You
see
...

What
the hell?
What're
they
talkin'
about?



Come
on,
get
up.

Ahh...you hit
your head
real good,
and passed
out...you
okay?

Huh?
Uh... Wait
a sec...
Charley?
You
mean...?
Uh...















Credits for the original Japanese edition:

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Firearms Consultant: Heihachiro Matsumoto

Special Thanks: Mitsuyoshi Azuma

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Comics Editor: Trabis 'Comic House'

Originally serialized in Kodansha's *Afternoon Monthly* manga magazine

Illustration Staff: Shintaro Suzuki, Takashi Heishiki, Akihiro Sugiyama,
Yasuhiro Torii, Souta Amada, Michiko Tatal

Written & Illustrated by Akira Hiramoto

The following section contains more information about the life and work of Robert Johnson. To read more about this legendary musician, please turn the book to the end and continue on, reading from left to right.



About the Author

Akira Hiramoto achieved great popularity in Japan with the humorous manga series *Chinless Gen and Me*, which has been serialized in *Weekly Young Magazine* since 1998. *Chinless Gen and Me* showed Hiramoto to be a master of comedy, but this uniquely versatile creator made an extraordinary change in artistic direction in 2004 with the dark and visionary *Me and the Devil Blues*. Both series are still continuing their successful runs.



I was in my teens when I first discovered the blues.

It was the early '60s, and (like 'Hotoke' Nagai and Makoto Ayukawa, who wrote the essays for *Me and the Devil Blues*, Book One) I heard my first blues riffs in the music of the British beat bands. The first actual blues album I ever got a hold of was by the Texan bluesman Lightnin' Hopkins. I didn't know a thing about blues back in those days, and there wasn't much information available. I must've found that album at an old used record store somewhere near Shinjuku. I probably just bought it because I liked the cover.

From that day on, I saved up all my lunch money, my allowance, and even did odd jobs so that I could buy as many blues albums as possible. I listened to all kinds of styles with no awareness whatsoever of what I was listening to... Delta blues, country blues, Texas blues etc. etc. The more I listened, the more absorbed I became. However, it was a bit later on that I first discovered Robert Johnson. I guess I just hadn't managed to come across his album in any of the record stores I frequented. But one fateful day, I wandered into a used record store called 'Time' in the Takadanobaba neighborhood of Shinjuku. (It was quite near my house.) That's where I finally happened upon the album called *The King of the Delta Blues Singers*. Now that I think about it, that was essentially the day I first 'met' Robert Johnson. It's a day worthy of commemoration and celebration. I brought it home, and I listened to it... and then listened to it again... and again... and again. This was the original version of the blues, and the mood was totally different from the modern blues of Clapton or the Stones. At the time, I had no idea of the depth and beauty of Johnson's lyrics. I was simply captivated by the mood of his music. As a musician who'd always played in bands, I was in disbelief that 'one man' alone could be capable of creating that sound, and yet there was no denying it.

Robert Johnson, Nagai, Ayukawa, and Azuma all touched on both the factual history and legend of his life in their essays in volumes 1 through 3. I imagine that those who have been reading this manga are diehard blues fans who have already learned all there is to know about Johnson's life, so I will leave that topic alone. It goes without saying that author Akira Hiramoto must also be a great fan of the blues. However, he differs from us (or at least me) in one important way. Hiramoto has taken the legend of Robert Johnson, and expanded it into a whole new story. I have tremendous respect for his creative power and the quality of his work! All three of the previous essays also make mention of this, but I must commend Hiramoto on his brilliant idea of taking the legend of Robert Johnson and turning it into an original new story!

I too once took a trip to Robert Johnson's 'homeland,' the Mississippi Delta. For me it was a sort of pilgrimage, a way to come into contact with the atmosphere, the mood, the spirit, and the legends of the blues that had so greatly impacted me from such an early age. Whenever I came upon a crossroads, I half expected Johnson to appear before me, guitar in hand. Throughout the trip, I was gripped with the feeling that I was wandering somewhere between reality and fantasy. This manga takes me right back to those days.

This is merely my own opinion, but I see Robert Johnson as existing on the same level as

Jimmy Hendrix, Vincent van Gogh, and Kenji Miyazawa. Each of these men transcended the medium of music, painting and writing, respectively. These are men whose genius propelled them to another level. I believe that Robert Johnson transcended the blues and exists in the realm of genius. Perhaps it seems like I am over-romanticizing Robert Johnson. Of course it may also be true that he was a petty scoundrel... just like us.

In Robert Johnson's lyrics, I can hear echoes of the psychedelic music of the 60s. Azuma used the term 'surrealist' to describe some of Johnson's lyrics in volume 3 and I would agree with his assessment. But how was Johnson able to invoke that psychedelic 'feeling' so many years before the psychedelic movement? This is a mystery of great depth I have a feeling that it is this sense of mystery along with the magical quality of Johnson's persona that have so inspired Hiramoto. I hope that this work is one day published abroad. It will be wonderful if this book leads a reader to discover Robert Johnson and to develop an interest in blues.

The last scene of this volume, in the juke joint, leaves us holding our breath in suspense. The final panel shows Robert Johnson in a pose well known to all his fans. Who knows where this deep and fascinating tale will take us next... Yeah! There is no other manga quite like this one.

Reichi Nakaido

Reichi Nakaido was born in 1950 in Tokyo's Shingyoku Ward. He made his musical debut in 1972 as part of the folk duo Furuido, and then became a member of the band RC Succession. Currently, in addition to his solo work, he also performs with the Chabo Band and as part of the duo Iruian, along with Kouhei Tsuchiya. He is also a well-known writer and poet.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but as far as I know *Me and the Devil Blues* is the only manga in the world that features a main character modeled after legendary bluesman Robert Johnson. I love listening to blues just as much as I love reading sci-fi novels but, it is certainly rare to find a sci-fi story in which the main character is a bluesman. The closest thing I can think of offhand is Jack Womack's *Terraplane*, in which Robert Johnson is actually not the lead character but does appear in the novel. The name "Terraplane" came from Robert Johnson's song "Terraplane Blues," so the novel certainly could not have existed without RJ. However, as far as his role in the story, well, let's just say that if it were a film he would be the type of character that you hear mentioned in the story, but whose face you never see. Perhaps the most interesting thing about this novel is the hit man character who is a huge Robert Johnson fan. This story takes place in the future and the character is always listening to Johnson's music on an iPod-like device.

Although I have never read Naoki Urasawa's *20th Century Boys*, I have heard that it mentions the legend of Robert Johnson. One thing I'm sure of is that although there are numerous CD collections and biographies about RJ, there are very few fictional works about Johnson in the world.

That is why when I read the first volume of *Me and the Devil Blues* I was so shocked. It was clear that the character of RJ was based on Robert Johnson. Even the character of his deceased wife Virginia was based on a real woman. Willie Brown and Son House, whom RJ meets at the juke joint and the mysterious bluesman Ike (or is he the devil?) are all based on and named after people who really did have influence on Robert Johnson's life. This helps to give the first half of volume 1 a biographical feel. We see Johnson suffering through backbreaking labor as a farmhand and returning each evening to his family. He's not much of a guitar player, but he dreams of one day being a star. This is the story of a man who lived over eighty years ago in a world that was very much the polar opposite of our own, and yet thanks to Hiramoto's skill as an artist and editor Hotoké's supervision, this colorful world is brought to life before our very eyes.

The timeless question "What is the blues?" is raised in volume 1 and debated by RJ, Son House, and Willie Brown. Can we Japanese ever truly understand the hardship that African Americans withstood under America's violently racist society? I have posed and pondered this question numerous times while in the recording studio or during a late night of drinking at the local pub, and it has often been taken up in music magazines as well. After my fifty years on this Earth and thirty-five years of appreciation of blues music, my opinion is this. "We can understand only what we can understand."

I'm not sure if you readers work a job where you have Saturday and Sunday off and then go back to work on Monday. I believe the Monday morning feeling of "Ah, I don't wanna go to work" is universal and transcends all borders. There are numerous blues songs that make reference to this "I hate Mondays" theme and any Japanese worker who hears this phrase will surely shout out in agreement "That's right, that's the truth." In that respect, the blues exists even within we Japanese.

Earlier I mentioned that Hiramoto's vivid depiction of Johnson truly "brings him to life." Through the character of RJ, Hiramoto has been able to create a story that allows Japanese readers like ourselves to identify with "the blues."

There may be some who say that the word blues should be transliterated into Katakana not as "Buruzuu" but as "Buruusu." To me, this is really just a case of "you say tomato I say tomahto." I don't think there is much depth to this argument.

After RJ finishes work, on a Saturday, his less-than-wholesome friend comes by and invites him to the juke joint. In today's world this would be one of those situations where your wife says "You'll be home for dinner, right?" and you respond in the affirmative as you leave for work in the morning. The next thing you know, you're out drinking with your buddies until one a.m. and you're thinking "Uh-oh, what am I in for when I get home?"

The phrase "The blues come knockin' at my door" appears in the lyrics of numerous blues songs. Those words have a hint of surrealism about them that can almost come across as slightly unsettling. If we go back to our example above of the juke joint, this phrase "The blues come knocking" could be pointing to the unwholesome friend who comes to "the door" and invites you (or RJ) to go drinking. These "blues" naturally lead to disaster (coming home at two a.m. and trying to come up with an excuse to tell the wife) but the effects are not all bad. Sitting with your friend and sharing hearty laughs over drinks happens precisely because you let the "blues" affect you.

The words "the blues" may only conjure up images of darkness, solitude, and ragged poverty, but there is also another side to the blues, one that may not be so readily acknowledged by the public. It would be misleading to speak of the blues without making reference to its other quality, that of pure "fun." This image of "fun" is clearly visible in Hiramoto's depiction of the hoppin' juke joint. Willie Brown and his buddies drinking booze and cutting loose, the young women dancing to the rhythm of the blues, the jokes overheard and the smiles seen on the faces of the patrons. These images all convey the joy and fun that is "the blues." Not all of Robert Johnson's recordings are about suffering, nor are they all of a serious nature. On the contrary many of his songs are very much like rock-and-roll songs with upbeat rhythms that get people's feet moving on the dance floor. The "fun" aspect of blues music shines through Robert Johnson's recordings.

Perhaps I've been talking a bit too much about the blues. As I mentioned before this manga is a work of fiction. The story is based on a blend of legend and biography, but Hiramoto's tale really takes off when it begins to depart from reality. For example, one of the many wonders of the Robert Johnson legend is that Johnson disappeared for a few months and when he resurfaced he had become a phenomenal guitar player. Over the years numerous theories about what happened to Johnson during these months have been offered up. Some say he sold his soul to the devil, or was abducted by aliens, or that he hid away in the mountains. Some even say he wrestled with a bear, and that he spent his time away reading numerous books while carrying firewood upon his back. Hiramoto's work can be seen as making use of the theory that Johnson sold his soul to the devil. However, as I read the story I found myself excited by the realization that Johnson's disappearance could also be seen as a kind of science fiction-esque time slip. Furthermore, pairing RJ with the gangster character Clyde gives the story almost a "road movie" like feeling. Surely if there were such

a thing as the Academy Awards of Manga, the character of Mr. McDonald would win best actor for his ability to move the story along with his perfect blend of creepiness and power. Meanwhile, throughout this third volume RJ is stuck in prison and his only hope is to rely on the pathetic Clyde and the indifferent Ike. Maybe he will somehow manage to break out of prison using a bottle-neck or perhaps the day before his lynching RJ will sing "Come on in My Kitchen," and the sheriff, moved to tears by RJ's performance, will ultimately set him free. Perhaps Son House will be called on to perform at one of Mr. McDonald's parties, where he will win over the crowd and convince them to free RJ. In any case, as I read this I keep thinking, "Someone's gotta get out there and help save RJ." Judging by the look in his eye, it seems Clyde has a plan up his sleeve. No doubt RJ will soon bust out of jail and their next adventure will begin. I can hardly wait for volume 4.

Mitsuyoshi Azuma

Mitsuyoshi Azuma—Company worker/musician. Born in 1956. While still a student he was invited to join the band of harpist Kotchiro Imoto. He quit working with bands temporarily when he got a job. He later formed the band "Mitsuyoshi Azuma and the Swinging Boppers" at a school reunion and has never been able to quit. His most recent album is *Seven and 80 decade* (Victor).